

III. WORK-BASED LEARNING

Tech-Prep and school-to-work efforts share a common objective: to facilitate students' entry into career-oriented employment. Although the Tech-Prep legislation was designed to promote successful student transitions to work after completion of a Tech-Prep program, many consortia now consider workplace experiences during school a useful feature and natural extension of their Tech-Prep programs. The grants available under the STWOA to expand work-based learning systems are encouraging Tech-Prep consortia to turn their attention to this school-to-work component. Tracking the extent to which consortia offer workplace opportunities and Tech-Prep students participate in them provides an early measure of school-to-work implementation progress in Tech-Prep communities.

A. AVAILABILITY OF WORKPLACE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS

Communities in Tech-Prep consortia can provide work-site experiences to Tech-Prep students in two ways. First, some rely on existing cooperative education, work-study, or other work-based learning programs as a structure for making work experiences generally available to interested students; Tech-Prep students can choose to participate in these programs. Second, other communities focus resources on developing the capacity to place particular groups of students at a work site as part of a Tech-Prep program and consider participation in these work-site activities a core part of the Tech-Prep experience.

The Tech-Prep annual survey provides information about both of these approaches to providing workplace opportunities for Tech-Prep students. Specifically, it addresses the following three issues:

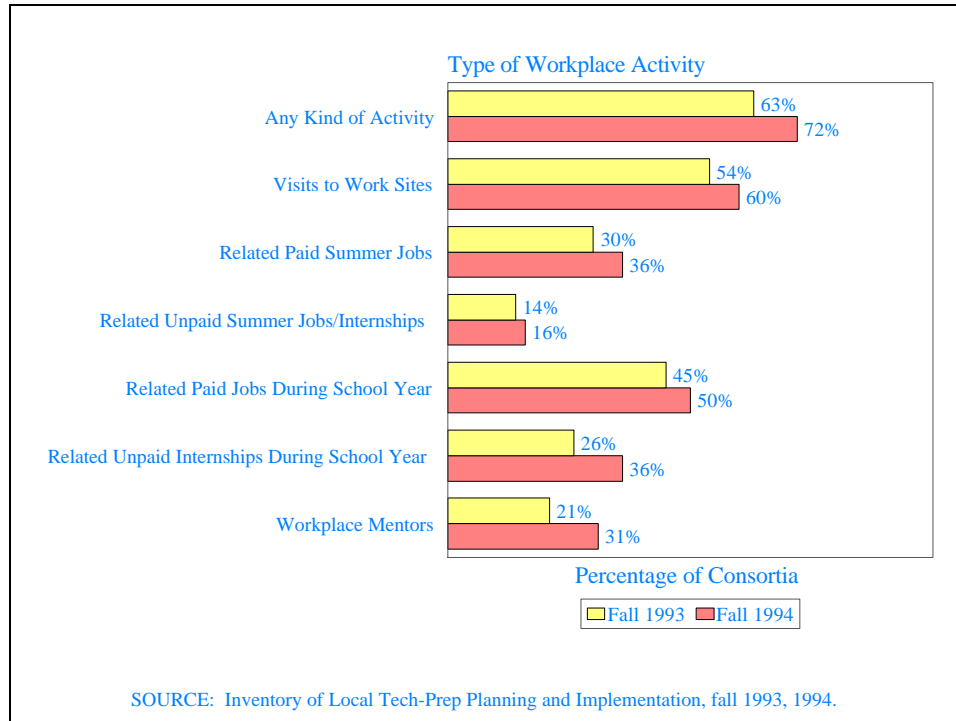
1. To what extent do consortia make workplace experiences available to Tech-Prep students?
2. Did the availability of specific types of workplace activities change?
3. Are workplace activities a fundamental part of Tech-Prep participation?

Workplace opportunities are available at some level in most Tech-Prep consortia

Many consortia offered workplace activities to Tech-Prep students and sometimes other students. In fall 1994, about six months after the STWOA became law, almost three-quarters of the consortia (619 out of 867) made some type of workplace experience available in at least one member district (Figure III.1). These experiences ranged from occasional activities, such as visits to employers or assignment to and interaction with workplace mentors, to activities requiring more intensive employer commitments, such as paid part-time jobs during the summer or school year.

FIGURE III.1

AVAILABILITY OF DIFFERENT WORKPLACE ACTIVITIES TO
TECH-PREP STUDENTS, FALL 1993 AND 1994



Tech-Prep students' access to workplace experiences has increased

The passage of the STWOA has probably affected the extent to which Tech-Prep students can engage in workplace activities. A higher proportion of consortia made workplace activities possible for Tech-Prep students in 1994 than in 1993 (Figure III.1). In fall 1994, 72 percent of consortia reported making some type of workplace experience available in at least one member district, compared with 63 percent in fall 1993. Consortia that offered workplace activities in both 1993 and 1994 did so in a somewhat higher proportion of districts in 1994 (60 percent) than in 1993 (56 percent).

Older grantees were more likely to offer these experiences than more recent grantees, which suggests that implementing work-based activities may be part of a second stage of development for Tech-Prep consortia. For example, 79 percent of first-time FY 1992 grantees, 67 percent of FY 1993 grantees, and 52 percent of FY 1994 grantees made some kind of workplace experience available to Tech-Prep students in at least one district.

All types of workplace activities were reportedly more widely available in 1994

All types of workplace opportunities for Tech-Prep students have expanded. The availability of each type of workplace activity except unpaid summer jobs (the least common workplace experience) rose by more than five percentage points among consortia (Figure III.1). The greatest increases occurred for school-year internships (up 10 percentage points) and assignment to workplace mentors (also up 10 percentage points). For each type of activity, most of the expansion resulted from greater availability among the older grantees in the year between 1993 and 1994.

Workplace experiences are offered inconsistently across consortium districts

Although many consortia made specific workplace activities available to students, they did so in a relatively small proportion of districts. For example, half of all consortia in fall 1994 (434) reported that paid part-time, school-year employment was available to Tech-Prep and other students, but these experiences were offered in only 42 percent of these consortia's districts (1,540 districts out of 3,650). Consortia offered most other types of workplace activities in even fewer districts. Only work-site visits were available in more than half of consortia's member districts (for those that offered workplace experiences).

Workplace activities are still not a core part of the Tech-Prep experience

A program that requires all Tech-Prep students to participate in workplace activities and develops the capacity to provide these students with work-site placements is more difficult to implement than a general program that helps interested students find positions and allows Tech-Prep students to participate. In fall 1994, a relatively high proportion of consortia reported viewing workplace experiences as a key component of Tech-Prep (290 of the 440 that reported on the characteristics of their core program). Some of these responses, however, reflected long-term ambitions rather than current program operations. About 23 percent of the consortia that reported workplace experiences as a core part of Tech-Prep did not, according to another survey question, actually make these experiences available that year.

Relatively few consortia in the 1994-1995 school year were actually implementing workplace experiences as a core Tech-Prep component. Of the 579 consortia in 1994 that made some type of workplace activity available to students and reported on the characteristics of their core program, only 205 (35 percent) considered involvement in workplace activities a part of the core Tech-Prep program. Fewer than one-quarter of the consortia that offered paid summer or school-year jobs made these experiences a requirement for Tech-Prep students.

These results probably indicate that, only six months after the STWOA became law and before most communities had received any STWOA funding, workplace activities in Tech-Prep districts were small-scale, voluntary, and largely uncoordinated with each other. Many of the 619 consortia that reported offering workplace experiences appear to have based their responses on the availability of existing, small work-based learning programs in a subset of their member districts, to which Tech-Prep students--like other students--had access. For example, consortia with at least one district offering a cooperative education program could legitimately have reported making workplace activities available.

B. PARTICIPATION IN WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES

The general availability of workplace activities in consortia and their member districts is not an accurate measure of Tech-Prep students' involvement in these activities. Many school districts offer work-study or cooperative education programs, but relatively few students participate. Analyzing actual levels of Tech-Prep student participation in different workplace experiences is an important step in examining the development of school-to-work systems, in which all students are expected to engage in some work-based learning.

Documenting Tech-Prep student involvement in workplace activities is difficult, however. In 1994, approximately half of all consortia did not identify and count the students participating in Tech-Prep reforms and could not be expected to report the number of these students in work-based learning experiences. Other consortia simply do not track workplace participation; although school's computer files may allow administrators to identify Tech-Prep students and to access records of their progress, the files do not usually document workplace experiences. These obstacles to recording student participation in work-based learning may be lessening somewhat, however. More Tech-Prep consortia have been able to report Tech-Prep participation (53 percent in 1994 versus 36 percent in 1993), and informal discussions with local and state Tech-Prep coordinators suggest that some communities may be developing systems to record student workplace experiences.

The survey data provide a baseline measure of student involvement in work-based learning for a specific population--Tech-Prep participants. The data can address three key issues:

1. To what extent are consortia able to report on Tech-Prep student involvement in workplace activities?
2. In which types of workplace experiences are Tech-Prep students involved?
3. What proportion of Tech-Prep students are participating in these activities?

Full documentation of Tech-Prep student participation in workplace experiences is relatively rare

Evidence from the fall 1994 survey underscores consortia's current difficulty in collecting information on the number of Tech-Prep students in workplace activities and portends obstacles school-to-work partnerships will probably face. Of the 619 consortia that reported making workplace experiences available for Tech-Prep students, only 175 (28 percent) were able to record consistently the number of Tech-Prep students participating in these experiences during the 1993-1994 school year.¹

¹Responses to survey questions about the number of Tech-Prep students in workplace activities were carefully reviewed and screened for consistency. Approximately one-quarter of the questionnaires that included responses to the relevant questions contained inaccurate or invalid answers relating to workplace activities. For example, approximately 20 consortia reported the number of Tech-Prep students in workplace activities but indicated in other sections of the questionnaire that they were not able to identify and count Tech-Prep students. Another 10 to 20 consortia were eliminated from the computations because the number of Tech-Prep students they reported as participating in workplace activities in the 1993-1994 school year exceeded the number of reported Tech-Prep participants by more than 10 percent. In 15

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Approximately 53 percent of the 444 consortia that did not provide counts of Tech-Prep workplace participants were unable to identify the number of Tech-Prep students in the 1993-1994 school year and thus could not document those who were in workplace activities. The other 47 percent probably did not have procedures in place to track Tech-Prep students who were involved in these activities.

Even consortia that could document Tech-Prep workplace experiences had limited capabilities to do so. For example, the 144 consortia that reported the number of Tech-Prep students involved in work-site visits could do so for only 406 districts, about half of the 799 districts for which they had counts of Tech-Prep students, or about 30 percent of their 1,335 consortium districts overall (Table III.1). The proportion of consortium districts that could report on other types of workplace activities (such as summer jobs or assignment to a workplace mentor) was even smaller.

Development stage may affect ability to report on Tech-Prep workplace involvement

The “maturity” of a consortium seems to influence its capacity to report on Tech-Prep students’ participation in workplace experiences. For example, 22 percent of FY 1992 grantees, 5 percent of FY 1993 grantees, and 1 percent of FY 1994 grantees reported the number of Tech-Prep students involved in work-based learning. This outcome is consistent with other results: older, more established consortia were more likely to be able to identify and track the progress of Tech-Prep students. In addition, older consortia were more likely than recent Tech-Prep grantees to offer workplace experiences to Tech-Prep students.

Visits to work sites are the most common workplace activity for Tech-Prep students

A variety of activities are considered work-based learning opportunities in the STWOA, and Tech-Prep students appear to have participated to some extent in most of them. More Tech-Prep students were involved in work-site visits than any other type of workplace experience. More than 23,832 Tech-Prep participants from 144 consortia visited at least one employer’s work site during the 1993-1994 school year (Figure III.2). A paid, part-time job, which could include jobs associated with cooperative education, work-study, or youth apprenticeship programs during the school year, was the second most common type of workplace activity for Tech-Prep students, according to consortia reports. Fewer students were involved in other types of workplace opportunities. Some Tech-Prep students probably participated and were counted in more than one activity during the year.

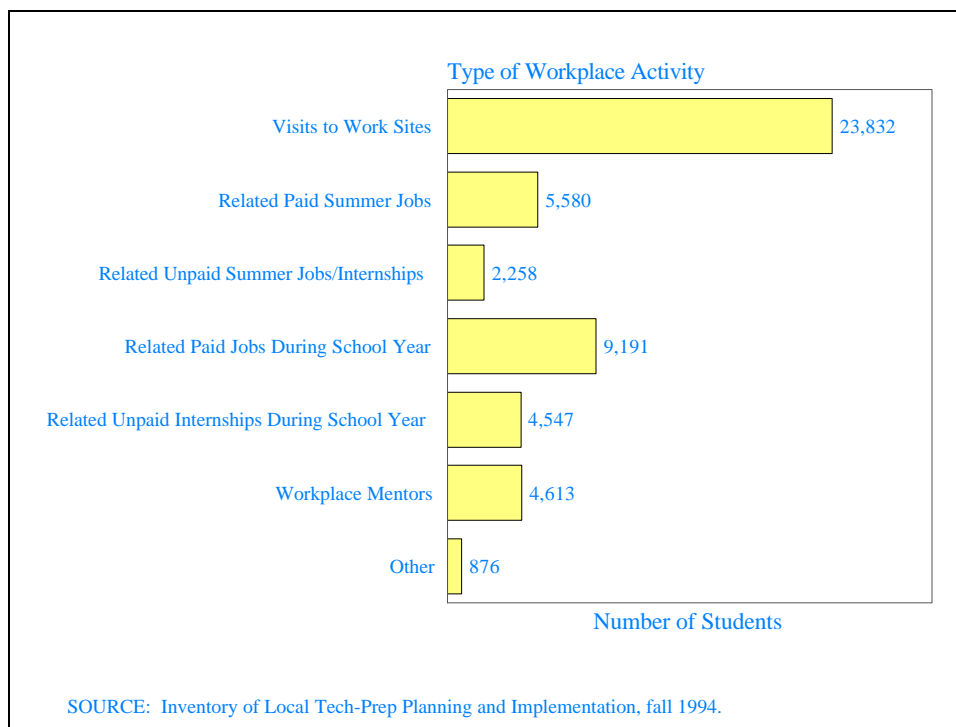
¹(...continued)

consortia, reports of participation in workplace activities were discounted because participation was reported in more districts than could report the number of Tech-Prep students. These inconsistencies are not unusual for responses to complex question patterns and counts of participation and outcomes.

TABLE III.1 CONSORTIUM ABILITY TO REPORT ON WORKPLACE PARTICIPATION, BY
TYPE OF WORKPLACE ACTIVITY

FIGURE III.2

NUMBER OF TECH-PREP STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN SPECIFIED
WORKPLACE ACTIVITIES, 1993-1994 SCHOOL YEAR



Only a small fraction of Tech-Prep students are so far involved in any workplace activity

Many practitioners believe Tech-Prep has the potential to provide a framework for developing school-to-work systems, according to informal discussions with state and local coordinators. To achieve this potential, Tech-Prep programs would have to expand the number of participants and systematically involve the majority of students in work-based learning. The survey data suggest that, at least in 1994, Tech-Prep consortia were quite far from achieving such widespread workplace activity. Among consortia that reported on Tech-Prep involvement in workplace activities, the proportion of Tech-Prep students who participated in these activities was quite small (Figure III.3). The largest group of Tech-Prep students (14 percent) was involved in visits to employer work sites. Fewer than five percent of Tech-Prep students had summer or school-year jobs related to their school-based occupational program. Since Tech-Prep participants represent only a fraction of all students, and the STWOA envisions broad participation in workplace activity for students in general, increasing the scale of workplace activity for STW systems remains a substantial challenge.

FIGURE III.3

PROPORTION OF TECH-PREP PARTICIPANTS IN SPECIFIED
WORKPLACE ACTIVITIES, 1993-1994 SCHOOL YEAR

